

10/13/20 Wires

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US Under Secretary Discusses Moldova November Election With President Dodon - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale has discussed the upcoming presidential election in Moldova with incumbent Moldovan President Igor Dodon and former Prime Minister Maia Sandu, State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a readout on Tuesday.

"In separate calls, Under Secretary Hale noted the importance of a free and fair electoral process that respects the will of the Moldovan people, including a level playing field for all candidates, the elimination of illegal foreign support for political campaigns, and unbiased access to mass media in accordance with Moldova's laws," Ortagus said. "He highlighted US support for robust election observation, including long-term observers from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights."

Moldova has scheduled to hold a presidential election on November 1. Dodon and Sandu are among the eight candidates in the presidential race.

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Trump Support From White Christian Voters Slips, Still a Majority - Poll

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) – White American Christians continue to back President Donald Trump's bid for a second term in office, albeit with support that has slipped since a mid-summer survey, the PEW Research Center said in a poll on Tuesday.

"Among White Catholic voters, Trump is ahead of Biden by 8 percentage points: 52 percent in this group say they would vote for Trump (or lean that way) if the election were held today, while 44 percent favor Biden," a press release explaining the poll said.

A previous PEW poll in late July and early August showed Trump 19 points ahead of Biden - 59 percent to 40 percent.

Support from White Protestants who do not consider themselves to be "evangelical or born-again" dropped from 59 percent in the summer survey to 53 percent, the release said.

Even White evangelical Protestants have become less enthusiastic in recent months, with support slipping from 83 percent to 78 percent, the release added.

Democratic candidate Joe Biden leads Trump among every other religious group included in the survey, including Black Protestants, Hispanic Catholics, Jews and the religiously unaffiliated, according to the release.

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US Remains Hopeful Russia Will Join Artemis Space Coalition to Moon - Bridenstine

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The United States remains hopeful that Russia will join its Artemis program to return humans to the surface of the Moon by 2024, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Administrator Jim Bridenstine told a virtual press conference on Tuesday.

"I remain very hopeful that Russia will join the Artemis Accords," Bridenstine said. "We will welcome what Russia might be willing to contribute to the program. We do value them as a partner and we hope they value us as a partner. ... All we are doing is operationalizing what we have agreed to in the Outer Space Treaty."

Russian Space Agency Roscosmos Director-General Dmitri Rogozin wanted to guarantee that when Moscow launched its own manned missions to the Moon its ships would be compatible with the docking procedures on the Gateway mini-space station that NASA wants to build in lunar orbit, Bridenstine said.

"Rogozin, when he has a Russian capsule that can go to the Moon, he wants to make sure it can dock with the Gateway," Bridenstine said. "Rogozin has been extremely gracious to me. We have a great relationship. ...Exploring space together is our joint heritage."

Next month, NASA and Roscosmos would celebrate 20 years of US astronauts and Russian cosmonauts working together in space, Bridenstine added.

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US Navy Reluctant to Build Sixth Generation Jet After F-35 Fiasco - Naval Operations Chief

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The US military does not have the time or money to waste on any ill-thought-out, enormously expensive and long delayed sixth generation fighter plane project like the F-35 fifth generation jet, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Adm. Michael Gilday told a Defense One State of the Navy podcast on Tuesday.

"The F-35A flew around 2000 - That's a whole generation [ago]," Gilday said. "We can't wait till 2045 or 2050, if we're going to make the investment in the multiple billions [of dollars]. We don't have time to wait or money to waste."

When asked, Gilday refused to commit to any decision to push ahead with plans for any ambitious sixth generation combat aircraft to replace the controversial, expensive and still problem-plagued F-35 jet. Instead, Gilday indicated that the Navy would focus instead on other spending priorities.

"My job is to maximize naval power. We are making a lot of cuts to put money in shipbuilding. I can't be buying stuff just to buy it," Gilday said.

The F-35 military program, the most expensive one in history, continues to suffer major problems, according to official reports. The Fiscal Year 1919 Operational Test report found the aircraft still had 873 unresolved deficiencies, including 13 Category 1 items that could endanger its survival.

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US Private Space Company Blue Origin Tests Lunar Landing Sensor in Partnership With NASA

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Blue Origin, the private space company funded by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, successfully completed the seventh test flight of its latest New Shepherd rocket system, including a test of a sensor developed with NASA for precision landings on the moon, the company announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"There were 12 payloads onboard including the Deorbit, Descent and Landing Sensor Demonstration under the NASA Tipping Point partnership. The lunar landing sensor demo ... will enable long-term lunar exploration, as well as future Mars missions," the release said. Tipping point refers to NASA deals with 14 US companies, including Blue Origin, for technology and equipment to place two American astronauts on the Moon by 2024 and later send humans to Mars.

Blue Origin's New Shepard system features a single booster topped with a crew capsule designed to carry paying space tourists to the edge of outer space, about 60 miles above Earth's surface, the release said.

After separating, the capsule floats for a few minutes in microgravity before returning to Earth with parachutes while the reusable booster rocket lands on its own, the release added.

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US Believes Agreement Exists on Extending New START With Russia In Principle - Billingslea

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - US negotiators believe there is an agreement with Russia in principle on the conditions to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), US Special Envoy for Arms Control Marshall Billingslea said during a webinar hosted by The Heritage Foundation on Tuesday.

"We believe that there is an agreement in principle at the highest levels of our two governments," Billingslea said. "I am hopeful that that sort of gentleman's agreement... will ultimately need to percolate down through their system so my counterpart hopefully will be authorized to negotiate."

Billingslea added that the United States is ready to strike the deal as soon as tomorrow.

However, Russian negotiators deny any breakthroughs in the arms control talks with the United States.

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US Willing to Extend New START in Exchange for Russia Freezing Nuclear Arsenal - Envoy

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is willing to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia in exchange for freezing both countries' nuclear arsenals for a period of time, US Special Envoy for Arms Control Marshall Billingslea said on Tuesday.

"We are in fact willing to extend the New START Treaty for some period of time provided that they in return agree to a limitation or freeze on their nuclear arsenal. We are willing to do the same," Billingslea said during a webinar hosted by The Heritage Foundation.

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Restricting Visas of Foreign Students, Journalists Contradicts Core US Values - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration's proposal to restrict the duration of visas for foreign students and journalists contradicts American core values and paints the country as anti-immigrant, state of Florida State Representative Anna Eskamani told Sputnik on Tuesday.

On September 24, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced an initiative to limit visas for foreign students in the United States to 2 to 4 years. The initiative also calls for restricting the duration of visas issued to foreign journalists to 240 days with an opportunity to obtain an extension of up to 240 days.

"Attacking our international students and foreign journalists is against our American values, and sets a tone that we are anti-immigrant," Eskamani said.

The congresswoman said her father came to the United States from Iran seeking higher education.

"It's essential that the United States welcome international students who not only contribute through tuition to our higher education institutions but also add so much talent to our workforce," she added.

The DHS initiative sends "a dangerous message" to foreign students that they are not welcome to study in the US, Eskamani added.

"The proposed rule continues to flame anti-immigrant fervor within the United States. It continues to paint our country as one that is against immigrants which is not how the majority of Americans feel," Eskamani said.

At present, foreign journalists can stay in the United States as long as they continue to perform their duties in compliance with the terms of admission.

The DHS said the significant growth of the F, J and I visa programs has necessitated the proposed update "to ensure the integrity of the US immigration system." It added that no changes are proposed to "the underlying requirements to qualify for these nonimmigrant classifications."

The proposed rule is opened for public discussion until October 26, and then will go to the Office of Management and Budget for review. Over 20,000 people submitted their comment, mostly opposing the DHS initiative.

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Increased Radioactivity Found at US Fracking Sites - Harvard Study

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Fracking is associated with increased radioactivity downwind from extraction sites, researchers from Harvard University said in a study released on Tuesday.

"An additional 100 upwind [unconventional oil and natural gas development (UOGD)] wells within 20 km is associated with an increase of 0.024 mBq/m³ (95% confidence interval [CI], 0.020, 0.028 mBq/m³) in the gross-beta particle radiation downwind," the study said.

The increased radioactivity levels are enough to induce adverse health effects to nearby residents, the study said.

The study analyzed data from 157 of the US Environmental Protection Agency's RadNet monitors between 2001 and 2017.

Fracking is a contentious method of extracting fossil fuels, where shale oil and gas are extruded by injecting liquid infused with chemicals into the ground under high pressure. Proponents have said that the extracted natural gas is a much more environmentally friendly energy source than coal, while detractors note the harmful environmental impacts, including surface water contamination, pollution and the increased propensity for earthquakes. In a presidential race that has seen contention over the environment, among other issues, both incumbent US President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden have vowed to uphold the practice.

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US Offers \$1Mln Reward for Mexican Drug Cartel Murder Mastermind - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The US government has offered a \$1 million award for information that will result in the capture of a high-ranking Mexican drug cartel member involved in directing cocaine traffic into the United States, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today the US Department of State announces a reward of up to \$1 million for information leading to the arrest and/or conviction of Jose Rodolfo Villarreal-Hernandez," Pompeo said. Jose Rodolfo Villarreal-Hernandez has been a high-ranking member of the Beltran-Leyva Organization (BLO) Drug Cartel with specific responsibility for maintaining control of the San Pedro Garza Garcia/Monterrey Plazas, the statement noted.

"Villarreal-Hernandez oversees an organization responsible for the importation of cocaine and marijuana into the United States. ...[He] is currently charged in the United States for his role in directing a cartel-related murder-for-hire of a Mexican defense attorney in the Dallas suburb of Southlake, Texas, in 2013," Pompeo said.

The reward is offered under the Department of State's Transnational Organized Crime Rewards Program (TOCRP). More than 75 transnational criminals and major narcotics traffickers have been brought to justice under TOCRP and the Narcotics Rewards Program (NRP) since the NRP's inception in 1986, the statement added.

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US Lawmakers Call for Virginia Registration Extension after Voting System Crash

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - US Representatives Don Beyer, Gerry Connolly and Jennifer Wexton called for a court order to extend a voter registration deadline by 72 hours in their native Virginia to offset disruptions of the state's Department of Elections website on Tuesday.

"The shutdown of Virginia's online voter registration threatens to prevent many Virginians from casting their ballots in the 2020 election," Democratic lawmakers said in a statement. "It is imperative that the deadline for Virginians to register to vote be extended. We hope the courts will swiftly grant such an extension."

The Virginia Department of Elections said earlier on Tuesday that the registration system went down on the last day for voters to sign in before the November 3 presidential and general elections as a result of a cable cut. Virginia Lieutenant Governor Justin Fairfax also called for an extension of the deadline, however, the state's Board of Elections has not announced any plans yet, according to media reports.

Beyer, Connolly and Wexton said that a 72-hour registration extension after the Department of Elections online portal is restored "would be appropriate." They reminded of a 2016 precedent when a federal judge granted an extension to Virginia's voter registration deadline after heavy web traffic resulted in disruptions to the portal.

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Russia, China, Cuba Among 15 States Elected to UN Human Rights Council

UNITED NATIONS, October 13 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly on Tuesday elected Russia, China, Cuba and 12 other countries to serve as members of the UN Human Rights Council for three-year terms starting January 1, 2021.

This year, elections to the Human Rights Council saw 16 candidates from four regional groups - African, Asia-Pacific, Eastern European, Latin American and Caribbean and Western European - competing for a seat at the Geneva-based body. To be elected, a country needed to obtain the required majority of 97 votes.

Russia received 159 votes in favor and will join the Eastern European group along with Ukraine that was re-elected for a second term with 166 votes in support.

China collected 139 votes and will be serving at the council along with Nepal, Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Saudi Arabia was not elected on the board as it failed to obtain the required majority with 90 votes.

Cuba, which received 170 votes in support, will join Mexico, Bolivia, France, the United Kingdom, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Malawi and Senegal in serving on the council for the next three years.

The UN Human Rights Council consists of 47 member states responsible for promoting and protecting human rights. Members are chosen by secret ballot and cannot be immediately re-elected after serving two consecutive terms.

Senegal, Nepal, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Mexico will be serving their second term at the body.

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Facebook Bans Anti-Vaccine Ads, Backs Flu-Shots as COVID-19 Safety Measure

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Facebook banned ads that discourage people from taking vaccines while announcing a separate campaign backing seasonal flu-shot to help mitigate the threat from COVID-19, the company said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Today, we're launching a new global policy that prohibits ads discouraging people from getting vaccinated," the release said. "Our goal is to help messages about the safety and efficacy of vaccines reach a broad group of people, while prohibiting ads with misinformation that could harm public health efforts."

The release cited recommendations from public health experts that a flu shot can help people remain "healthy and safe" during the coronavirus pandemic, even though a COVID-19 vaccine will not be widely available anytime soon.

Ads that advocate for or against legislation or government policies around vaccines – including a COVID-19 vaccine – are still allowed. But the post must include a label informing readers who paid for the ad, the release said.

The release also announced a Facebook collaboration with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) to expand vaccine use worldwide.

"Building demand for vaccination in communities worldwide is key to saving lives," UNICEF Senior Vaccine Adviser Diane Summers said in the release. "Our collaboration with Facebook is

part of our efforts to address vaccine misinformation and share resonant and reassuring information on vaccination."

Global vaccination campaigns by UNICEF and other health advocacy groups have eliminated deadly diseases such as smallpox and nearly eliminated polio.

However a bogus claim that inoculations against childhood diseases such as measles cause autism have led to vaccine boycotts and epidemics in some regions of the United States.

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Russia to Continue Supporting Partnership With US Municipalities - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Russia will continue to back the partnership between Russians and Americans on local and municipal levels, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said during a Sister Cities International Global Conversation on Tuesday.

"The Russian side will continue to actively support the development of ties at the regional and municipal levels," Antonov said. "We believe that it will be mutually beneficial for dwellers of sister cities and stabilize the whole complex of the Russian-American relations."

Antonov said a "pragmatic approach" on the part of US states to cooperating with Russian republics would be helpful and acknowledged the particular importance of such contacts given that they create new opportunities for partnerships.

"It would be great if every state in the United States could find a partner among the federal subjects of Russia and outline specific plans and mutually beneficial projects," Antonov said. Such cooperation could help build a stronger foundation for communication at the federal level, Antonov added.

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Senior US Official Heading to France to Discuss Cooperation on Stabilization - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations Denise Natali is heading to France this week for meetings with senior officials to discuss cooperation on stabilization and response, the State Department announced in a release on Tuesday.

"In France, Assistant Secretary Natali will meet with senior officials to advance US priorities and enhance collaboration on stabilization, atrocity early warning and response, and the Global Fragility Strategy," the release said.

Natali will meet with senior leaders from France's Humanitarian and Stabilization Operations, Crisis and Support Office and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the release also said.

In addition, Natali will visit the Shoah Memorial to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of concentration camps at the end of World War II, the release added.

Natali's visit to Paris will last from October 13 through October 17, according to the release.

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US Contractor Pleads Guilty to Trying to Steal American Federal Equipment - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - A US contractor has pleaded guilty to conspiring to steal government equipment from a United States military base in Afghanistan, the Justice Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

"An American military contractor pleaded guilty today to her role in a theft ring on a military installation in Kandahar, Afghanistan," the release said.

The Justice Department said the contractor, Varita Quincy of the state of Georgia, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States and one count of making false statement.

Quincy worked as a supervisor in an office that issued security badges for the movement of personnel and property at the Kandahar Airfield and worked with an accomplice, Larry Green of Virginia, to carry out the scheme, the Justice Department said.

Green notified Quincy which items were of value to steal so he created false official documents to remove the stolen items out of the base in order to sell them, the Justice Department also said.

Green pleaded guilty to multiple charges related to the scheme in July and has his sentencing scheduled on November 19. Quincy's sentencing is set for February 23, 2021, according to the release.

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G24 Urges Major Economies to Help Developing Countries in Post-Pandemic Recovery

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The major global economies should cooperate in helping developing countries to recover after the COVID-19 crisis, the Group of 24 (G24) said in a statement on Tuesday.

"We call on the major economies to work together and use all policy tools available to foster a supporting environment to help countries striving to contain the pandemic and restore an inclusive economic growth," the statement read.

Advanced economies should facilitate international trade and investment, and support economic growth and development, it added.

This year, emerging markets face negative GDP growth for the first time in several decades, the G24 noted.

"The pandemic is also exacerbating inequality, with millions of people losing their livelihood and falling into poverty," the group said.

The G24 welcomed Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), adopted by the G20 to support emerging economies. The group also called for extending DSSI beyond 2020.

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WTO Ruling Gives EU No Basis to Impose Tariffs on American Goods - US Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The European Union has no lawful basis to impose tariffs on imports from the United States, the Office of US Trade Representative (USTR) said in a statement Tuesday, adopting one of several WTO decisions that allowed the EU to tax Boeing planes and other US-made goods.

"The World Trade Organization issued an arbitration decision today that leaves the European Union with no lawful basis to impose tariffs on imports from the United States," the USTR statement said. "The EU sought the right to impose countermeasures relating to NASA and Department of Defense research and development subsidies, but the WTO arbitrator rejected that request."

The USTR noted that the EU also sought the right to impose countermeasures relating to the Washington State Business & Occupation tax rate reduction.

"The WTO arbitrator explicitly did not take into consideration Washington State's repeal of that tax provision on April 1 of this year, limiting its review to the impact during the 2012-15 period, to which it assigned a value of approximately \$4 billion per year," the release said.

Regardless of the USTR position, the World Trade Organization ruled on Tuesday that the European Union may impose tariffs on \$3.99 billion in Boeing Co. jets and other U.S. goods annually as part of a long-running trade dispute.

The ruling cleared the way for the EU to respond to tariffs that the trade body last October authorized the U.S. to impose on \$7.5 billion in Airbus SE jets and other imported European products, the largest arbitration award in WTO history.

US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer said pursuant to the WTO decision, the United States was determined to find a resolution to a dispute that could do harm to US aerospace workers and businesses. "We are waiting for a response from the EU to a recent US proposal and will intensify our ongoing negotiations with the EU to restore fair competition and a level playing field to this sector," Lighthizer said. "While we disagree with certain aspects of its valuation, the more important point is that the arbitrator did not authorize any retaliation for subsidies other than the Washington State tax break."

The US-EU dispute is the longest in WTO's history. In 2004, the United States took European countries to the WTO over subsidies to Airbus. Europe responded soon after with a case against US support for Boeing.

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US Charges 14,200 Americans With Firearms Crimes in Fiscal Year 2020 - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The US government has charged more than 14,000 people with crimes involving guns during the full Fiscal Year 2020, which ended on September 30, the Department of Justice announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"Today, the Justice Department announced it has charged more than 14,200 defendants with firearms-related crimes during Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, despite the challenges of COVID-19 and its impact on the criminal justice process," the release stated.

Attorney General William Barr made the prosecution of crimes involving firearms a priority in November 2019 when he announced his commitment to investigating, prosecuting, and combatting them as a critical part of the department's anti-violent crime strategy.

"These firearms-related charges are the result of the critical law enforcement partnership between U.S. Attorneys' Offices and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), led by Acting Director Regina Lombardo, who has made firearms-related investigations a priority," the release explained.

Under federal US law, it is illegal to possess a firearm for convicted felons, illegal aliens, or unlawful users of controlled substances, or in carrying out any drug trafficking offense or violent crime, the Justice Department said.

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Americans' Willingness to Take COVID-19 Vaccine Plunges 11 Points to 50% - Poll

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Acceptance of a COVID-19 vaccine by US adults plunged by 11 percentage points in late September from a month earlier, with half of those surveyed saying they would refuse to be vaccinated, a Gallup poll revealed on Tuesday.

Partisanship possibly triggered by President Donald Trump's announcement that a vaccine could be ready in October likely explained a shift in confidence that a vaccine will be safe, Gallup said in a press release explaining the poll.

"After two months of Democrats being more likely than Republicans to say they would be vaccinated, about half of all political party groups now say they would get the vaccine. This marks a new low among Democrats and independents, while Republicans' interest in getting the vaccine has returned to the levels recorded in July, up from their low point in late August," the release said.

Currently, 53% of Democrats said they would take a vaccine, down from 78 percent a month earlier. That compares with 49 percent of Republicans willing to be vaccinated, up from 37 percent a month earlier. Among independent voters, 49 percent would now decline a vaccine, down from 57 percent, the release added.

"It appears some Americans have lost confidence in the safety of the approval process for the vaccine, and are not merely answering as if a vaccine were literally available right now," the release said

Polls since early August have consistently found young adults to be more willing than middle-aged and older adults to be vaccinated, according to Gallup.

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US State of Georgia Sets Early Voting Record - Official

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The US state of Georgia saw a record high turnout with over 126,000 ballots cast on Monday, the first day for early voting in the presidential election, Secretary of State spokesperson Walter Jones said in a statement.

"Georgia is seeing record turnout for early voting because of excitement and enthusiasm. Long lines are to be expected," Jones said on Tuesday as quoted by The Wall Street Journal.

According to the Secretary of State's office, 126,876 people voted on Monday, breaking a previous record of around 90,000. Amid coronavirus concerns Georgia voters requested more than 1.35 million absentee ballots as of late September, compared with 241,519 issued for the 2016 presidential election.

Some polling stations experienced long lines of voters with waiting times stretching over six to eight hours, The Wall Street Journal cited local officials.

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UN Special Envoy, Hadi Meet in Riyadh to Discuss Yemen Conflict Resolution - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 13 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths and Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi met in Saudi Arabia to discuss the resolution of the conflict in Yemen, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"Griffiths has been in Riyadh. Among other people, he was going to be meeting with President Hadi, the Yemeni President and other senior officials," Haq said. "I believe those talks are continuing into today, and we'll see what we have to say once that's done."

Griffith's office said via Twitter that the special envoy and the Yemeni president had also exchanged views of the draft Joint Declaration on establishing a nationwide ceasefire.

For over five years, Yemen has been engulfed in an armed confrontation between the government forces, led by Hadi, and Houthi rebels.

In December 2018, the Houthi rebels signed a United Nations-sponsored peace accord in Sweden to ease tensions in the war-torn nation. Under the terms of the accord, the sides

agreed to a ceasefire in Yemen's port of Al Hudaydah, the exchange of around 15,000 individuals and the establishment of humanitarian corridors in the area.

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Moscow Hopes Russophobic Rhetoric Will Not Cause More Harm to Relations With US - Antonov

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Moscow is hopeful that anti-Russia rhetoric will not lead to additional damage to the US-Russia relations, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said at the Sister Cities International Global Conversation.

"The 'Russia card' is still being actively exploited during the campaign. Baseless allegations of Russian interference in the democratic process never stop," Antonov said. "Nevertheless, we hope that common sense will prevail and Russophobic rhetoric will not result in additional blows to our relations."

Antonov said relations between the two nations are currently in deep crisis, and almost daily Russia faces baseless accusations.

"Our country is labeled an 'adversary' that must be deterred in every possible way. And any constructive development in the bilateral dialogue is somehow perceived as a sort of concession by Washington," the ambassador said. "We, of course, do not share this approach. We have consistently advocated for a higher level of stability and predictability of Russian-American ties."

Antonov continued to stress that peace and prosperity on the planet depend on the interaction between Russia and the United States that are the biggest nuclear powers and UN Security Council permanent members.

"The only thing we want is to build relations on the basis of equality and mutual consideration of interests," he said. "It is worth noting that prominent American ex-officials and experts increasingly often voice the idea that Washington should revise its policy towards Russia and abandon attempts to achieve unilateral concessions from Moscow. In the run-up to presidential elections in the United States breakthroughs can hardly be expected."

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly said that he would like US-Russia relations to be normalized and has expressed his intention to develop cooperation in various spheres of mutual interests. However, relations between the two countries have hit an all-time low during the Trump administration.

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NASA Partner Nations Sign Legal Framework for Lunar Exploration, Colonization- Bridenstine

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Seven Nations participating in US lunar exploration efforts joined the United States in signing the "Artemis Accords," a legal framework intended to ensure the peaceful exploration of outer space, NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine announced on Tuesday.

"With today's signing, we are uniting with our partners to explore the Moon and are establishing vital principles that will create a safe, peaceful, and prosperous future in space for all of humanity to enjoy," Bridenstine said in a virtual event sponsored by the International Astronautical Conference.

The event featured representatives of space agencies in Australia, Canada, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, United Arab Emirates and United Kingdom, along with NASA and the US State Department, in a virtual signing ceremony featuring nine simultaneous video feeds.

NASA drafted the Artemis Accords earlier this year to guide future cooperative activities between the US space agency and partner agencies, the release said.

At the close of the event Bridenstine said there was "room for more" nations to join the US-led Artemis program, which seeks to land two astronauts on the south pole of the Moon by 2024 and eventually establish a permanent lunar colony.

Bridenstine mentioned no other nations by name, but in the past he has urged Russia - a US partner on the International Space Station - to participate.

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US Senate Majority Leader Schedules Vote on COVID-19 Stimulus Without Support of Democrats

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Senate Republicans aligned with President Donald Trump will vote next week on a smaller economic stimulus bill for the coronavirus than that sought by rival Democrats, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Tuesday, signaling action on an initiative likely to fail again without support from the other side.

"When the full Senate returns on October 19th, our first order of business will be voting again on the targeted relief for American workers, including new funding for the PPP," McConnell said in a statement, referring to the Paycheck Protection Program. "Republicans do not agree that nothing is better than something for working families."

Congress passed four packages of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in the second quarter of this year, dispensing roughly \$3 trillion as PPP for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid to qualifying US citizens and residents.

Republicans and Democrats have been locked in a stalemate since on a successive package to the CARES, arguing over the size of the next relief, as thousands of Americans, particularly those in the airlines sector, risked losing their jobs without further aid. Trump, who stands for reelection on November 3, has accused US House Speaker and top congressional Democrat Pelosi of playing political football over the issue. Pelosi says any deal approved should be to the advantage of Americans, and not for Trump's political expediency.

Last week, Trump, after various about-turns on the issue, proposed a \$1.8 trillion bill that still fell short of the Democrats' demand for \$2.2 trillion. Pelosi and US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin have spoken on the phone at least twice since but have been unable to agree to a deal. Without the support of Democrats, the Senate vote on the stimulus led by McConnell will also fail the Senate filibuster test it must pass to become law.

"Tragically, the Trump proposal falls significantly short of what this pandemic and deep recession demand," Pelosi said in a letter to her Democratic colleagues, published on Tuesday. While she remained hopeful for a deal, she added that "significant changes must be made to remedy the Trump proposal's deficiencies. Updates will continue."

The United States leads the global case count for the coronavirus, with 7.8 million infections and more than 215,000 deaths, according to data monitored by Johns Hopkins University.

The US economy itself shrank at its fastest pace in history in the second quarter of 2020, contracting by 31.4 percent amid widespread lockdowns triggered by the pandemic. While economic data has been encouraging in recent months, recovery from the pandemic itself has remained spotty. On the jobs front, the United States gained 661,000 jobs in September, less than half than in August, as labor market recovery from the coronavirus pandemic slowed.

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Virginia Governor Also Targeted in Militia Kidnapping Plot - FBI

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - An FBI agent testified on Tuesday that Virginia Governor Ralph Northam was also targeted in a militia plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer over their statewide lockdown orders due to the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

"At this meeting they discussed possible targets, taking a sitting governor, specifically issues with the governors of Michigan and Virginia, based upon the lockdown orders," Trask said during a preliminary testimony in the US District Court in Grand Rapids, Michigan as quoted by The Washington Post.

The Virginia governor's office said in a separate statement that key members of the governor's security team were notified by the FBI about the potential threat. Northam and his family did not face imminent danger, but enhanced security measures have been placed for a while and will remain in place, the statement said.

Moreover, the governor's office blames this incident on President Donald Trump's rhetoric, specifically his statement posted in April on Twitter to "Liberate Virginia" after the governor placed lockdown orders.

On Thursday, US authorities announced that 13 men with links to militia groups were arrested and face state and federal charges for allegedly plotting to kidnap Whitmer after she imposed a state-wide lockdown due to COVID-19.

Whitmer also blames Trump's rhetoric for fueling hate groups, adding that his remarks at the first presidential debate for a certain militia group to "stand back and stand by" are seen as a call to action.

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Nearly 200 People Killed, 35,000 Displaced In Southern Afghan Province - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 13 (Sputnik) - Almost 200 people were killed and 35,000 forced to flee in the fighting between Afghan government forces and the Taliban in Afghanistan's southern province of Helmand, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"Continued fighting between Afghan National Security Forces and non-state armed groups in the south near Lashkar Gah city in Helmand province has reportedly displaced about 35,000 people," Haq said. "According to initial estimates from local authorities, nearly 200 people have been killed or injured and this number could change as assessments are ongoing."

On Saturday, the Taliban launched a series of attacks in Helmand province's Nad-e-Ali district and Babaji area and pushed back the Afghan security forces.

Haq said that several health facilities were closed, electricity cut and telephone networks affected in several affected areas, impacting humanitarian response.

The conflict in Afghanistan has already displaced more than 208,000 people this year, Haq added.

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Biden Leads Trump by 3 Points in Battleground State of North Carolina - Poll

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Former Vice President Joe Biden leads President Donald Trump by three percentage points among registered voters in the battleground state of North Carolina, a Monmouth University poll said on Tuesday.

Biden leads with a 49-46 percent margin among all registered voters, with the former vice president's lead increasing to 4 points in a high turnout scenario and shrinking to 1 percent if voter participation is low, the release said.

"There has been some shifting within the electorate but the overall picture remains the same — another tight presidential contest in North Carolina. Basically, it looks like Trump has been locking in his base at the expense of swing voter support," Monmouth University Polling Institute Director Patrick Murray said in a press release explaining the poll.

The previous Monmouth poll taken in September had Biden ahead by two points.

Each of the last three presidential elections were decided by fewer than four percentage points in North Carolina, the release added. Trump won the state in 2016 with a 3.7 percent margin.

Both campaigns are concentrating on so called battleground states such as North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Florida, Wisconsin and Ohio, crucial to obtaining the 270 electoral votes needed to win.

Biden is up 2.7% in North Carolina on average in the most recent six surveys posted on Realcleapolitics.com (RCP), which includes Tuesday's Monmouth poll. The former vice president is ahead by more than 10% in the RCP average, and leads in 8 of the top ten largest swing states. However, Biden's lead in four of those 8 states is within a typical margin of error range.

Electoral votes are allocated to individual states based on their representation in Congress, a system that makes it possible for a candidate to win the presidency without winning the nationwide popular vote, as with Trump's 2016 victory.

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US Army Chief of Staff Says Doctors Allowed Him to End COVID-19 Self-Quarantine

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - US Army Chief of Staff James McConville said on Tuesday that he has been cleared by doctors to end the self-quarantine after consistently testing negative for the novel coronavirus.

"I was tested this morning - all negative, and I have been cleared by the docs to come back in. It's great to be with you all today. No positive tests, all negative all the way through in the most intensive testing," McConville said during a briefing at the Defense Department.

Last week, Defense Department spokesperson Jonathan Hoffman announced that several senior US military leaders were self-quarantining after meeting with the Coast Guard Vice Commander Charles Ray who had tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

McConville told reporters that out of abundance of caution, he self-quarantined for "a couple of days" and was screened and tested multiple times - "all negative all the way through."

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G7 Calls For Stablecoin Halt Until Digital Coins Safe From Ransomware - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Finance leaders from the Group of Seven nations are worried about rising ransomware attacks on digital currency amid the coronavirus outbreak, and have called for a halt on the so-called "stablecoin" without adequate safeguards, a G7 statement said.

"The G7 is concerned by the rising threat of ransomware attacks, particularly in light of malicious actors targeting critical sectors amid the COVID-19 pandemic," the group said in a statement on Tuesday. "The G7 continues to maintain that no global stablecoin project should begin operation until it adequately addresses relevant legal, regulatory, and oversight requirements through appropriate design and by adhering to applicable standards."

Stablecoin is a new class of cryptocurrencies that attempts to offer price stability and are backed by a reserve asset.

Tuesday's statement - issued after a video meeting hosted by US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin among G7 finance ministers and central bank governors, as well as heads of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and Financial Stability Board — noted that digital currencies had the potential to address frictions and reduce inefficiencies and cost in existing payment systems.

"At the same time, payment services should be appropriately supervised and regulated to address challenges and risks related to financial stability, consumer protection, privacy, taxation, cybersecurity, operational resilience, money laundering, terrorist and proliferation financing, market integrity, governance, and legal certainty, among others," the statement said. "A number of G7 authorities are exploring the opportunities and risks associated with central bank digital currencies. Confidence in the stability of domestic payment systems and the international monetary system is underpinned by credible and longstanding public sector commitments to transparency, the rule of law, and sound economic governance."

Concerns over the vulnerability of digital currencies to ransomware have spiked since the global outbreak of the coronavirus in March forced more users indoors, leading to a surge in online-based payments.

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G7 Finance Ministers, Central Bankers in 'Regular Contact' Over COVID-19 - US Treasury

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Finance ministers and central bankers of the Group of Seven (G7) countries are in close contact to respond as quickly and effectively to the novel coronavirus outbreak, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The G7 Finance Ministries and Central Banks remain in regular contact and continue to coordinate on timely and effective actions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic," the statement said.

The statement was issued after a video conference hosted by US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin with the finance ministers and central bank governors of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, the European Commission and the Eurogroup.

The heads of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and Financial Stability Board also joined the discussion, the statement added.

The statement added that in the lead-up to the IMF and World Bank annual meetings, the finance ministers and central bank governors discussed domestic and international economic responses underway and strategies to achieve a robust recovery throughout the global economy.

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Pompeo to Launch US-Saudi Strategic Dialogue in Washington October 14 - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The United States and Saudi Arabia will start this week a strategic dialogue to pursue their goals in the Middle East, the US State Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Secretary Michael R. Pompeo will welcome Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister His Highness Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud to Washington, DC on Wednesday, October 14 for the inaugural US-Saudi Strategic Dialogue," the statement said.

Both governments are going focus on furthering of regional security and prosperity, economic development and people-to-people exchanges, the statement added.

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Army Secretary Says No Requests Made for National Guard to Ensure US Election Security

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The US military has not received any requests for the National Guard to be used to ensure security during the upcoming November presidential election, Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy said in a press briefing on Tuesday

"There have been no requests from other agencies to support at this time," McCarthy said in response to a question whether he anticipated the National Guard to play any role in ensuring the security of the November election.

McCarthy also said "we are always available to support the Metro police department or other federal agencies."

The United States presidential election is set to be held on November 3.

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Virginia System Goes Down on Last Day of Voter Registration Due to Cut Cable - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The Virginia voter registration system has gone down on the last day for voters to register before the November 3 presidential and general elections as a result of a cable cut, the Virginia Department of Elections said in a statement on Tuesday.

"This morning we were alerted by VITA [Virginia Information Technology Agency] that a fiber cut near the Commonwealth Enterprise Solutions Center was impacting data circuits and VPN connectivity for multiple agencies," the statement said. "This has affected the citizen portal along [with] registrar's offices."

VITA said in a separate statement that the fiber cut is impacting data circuits and virtual private network connectivity for multiple state agencies, including the statewide voter registration system.

Virginia Lieutenant Governor Justin Fairfax has called for an extension of the voter registration deadline because of the incident, however, the state's Board of Elections has not announced any plans to extend it, according to media reports.

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US Cites Russia, China in Request for Foreign Funding Data of Think Tanks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The United States wants think tanks that engage with government officials on foreign policy issues to begin disclosing funding from foreign governments such as Russia and China, the US State Department said a press release Tuesday.

"The [State] Department requests henceforth that think tanks and other foreign policy organizations that wish to engage with the Department disclose prominently on their websites funding they receive from foreign governments, including state-owned or state-operated subsidiary entities," the release said.

Such disclosures are "more important than ever" because some foreign governments, such as those of China and Russia, seek to influence US foreign policy through think tanks, the release also said.

Disclosure on websites is not required and the request is separate from disclosure requirements under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which requires lobbyists and experts paid by foreign governments to register with the Justice Department, the release added.

A recent report from the Center for International Policy identified more than \$174 million in foreign funding that was voluntarily disclosed by top think tanks 2014-2018, including the World Resources Institute, the Center for Global Development and the Brookings Institution.

However, many of the top 50 US think tanks fail to reveal overseas supporters, because disclosure is not required by law, according to the report.

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New York Police Ordered to Prepare For Protests Before, After Election - Memo

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - New York Police Department (NYPD) Commissioner Dermot Shea told all uniformed NYPD members to prepare to deal with protests before and after the November 3 US presidential election, according to a department memo that was obtained and published by CNN.

Plans to respond to the anticipated unrest include redeployments sending deputy inspectors and captains to command field forces beginning on October 25, Shea said in the memo, according to the report.

In the memo, Shea also told his forces to prepare for the possibility that the result of the election may not be decided for several weeks after November 3, as previously occurred in 2000, the memo also said, according to the report.

The anticipated protests may also grow in scale, intensity and frequency and may extend into January 2021, Shea also wrote in the memo, the report said.

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US Expands Tests of Promising COVID-19 Treatments For Hospitalized Patients - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - A nationwide US study of promising treatments seeks volunteers hospitalized with COVID-19 to determine which therapies merit advancement to larger clinical trials, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"The Phase 2 adaptive, randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial will compare different investigational therapies to a common control arm to determine which experimental treatments have relatively large effects," the release said.

Approximately 100 hospitalized volunteers will be assigned to each study arm at up to 40 sites throughout the United States, with each site testing up to three investigational treatments.

The release named two laboratory-grown antibody therapies, risankizumab and lenzilumab, in combination with the anti-viral drug remdesivir. In each trial, a control group will be treated with remdesivir and a placebo.

Risankizumab was approved in the United States in 2019 for the treatment of severe plaque psoriasis, while Lenzilumab is currently being tested separately in a phase 3 COVID-19 study.

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GDP in Most Countries to Recover to Pre-Pandemic Levels By 2022 - IMF

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) assesses that most countries in the world will return to pre-coronavirus pandemic GDP levels by 2020, IMF Chief Economist Gita Gopinath said during a virtual briefing on Tuesday.

"Most countries of the world we are seeing return back to the 2019 [GDP] levels by 2022," Gopinath told reporters.

However, Gopinath noted that some regions in the world are expected to take longer to recover because they face different impacts from the novel coronavirus crisis.

"There are some regions in the world where it [the recovery] is projected to take even longer," Gopinath said.

The IMF expects that Latin America will return back to pre-pandemic GDP levels in 2023, she added.

On Tuesday, the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook that the world's GDP in 2020 will decline less than previously expected and now is forecast to contract by 4.4 percent rather than 4.9 percent.

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US Urges Turkey to End 'Calculated Provocation' in Eastern Mediterranean - State Dept

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on Turkey to stop what it regards as a "calculated provocation" in the Eastern Mediterranean and launch negotiations with Greece, US State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a statement on Tuesday. "Coercion, threats, intimidation, and military activity will not resolve tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean," Ortagus said. "We urge Turkey to end this calculated provocation and immediately begin exploratory talks with Greece. Unilateral actions cannot build trust and will not produce enduring solutions."

On Monday, the Turkish ship Oruc Reis departed Turkey for another 10-day seismic exploration mission in hotly disputed waters that Greece considers to be part of its continental shelf. Ankara announced the move in a Navtex advisory issued late on Sunday.

"The United States deplores Turkey's October 11 announcement of renewed Turkish survey activity in areas over which Greece asserts jurisdiction in the Eastern Mediterranean," Ortagus said. "Turkey's announcement unilaterally raises tensions in the region and deliberately complicates the resumption of crucial exploratory talks between our NATO Allies Greece and Turkey."

The Greek Foreign Ministry on Monday slammed what it called Turkey's "illegal" Navtex advisory on its exploration near the island of Kastellorizo. Athens in particular criticized Ankara's decision to conduct new surveys just days after Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias met with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu to discuss a potential pathway for easing regional tensions.

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US Urges Minsk to Let Leader of Belarus Roman Catholic Church Back into Country - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on Minsk to allow Catholic Archbishop Kondrusiewicz to return to the country, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Tuesday.

"I urge the Belarusian government to right this wrong and allow the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus back into his country," Pompeo said.

Pompeo noted that it has been more than 40 days since authorities in Belarus denied Kondrusiewicz entry on what he called "spurious" grounds.

"Their action is itself an injustice and an affront to religious freedom. Faith is not merely a private endeavor," Pompeo said.

A citizen of Belarus, Kondrusiewicz was banned from returning home from Poland, where he traveled for work in late August. Prior to that, the religious official harshly criticized the Belarusian security forces for blocking the entrance to the Church of Saints Simon and Helena, also known as the Red Church, during the pro-opposition protests in Minsk. He also called on the Belarusian government to launch a dialogue with the protesters.

Last week, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said that Kondrusiewicz had been included in the joint no-entry list of people of Belarus and Russia. The Belarusian State Border Committee refused to comment on the matter to Sputnik.

Mass opposition protests broke out across Belarus following a presidential election on August 9 that saw incumbent President Lukashenko reelected for a sixth term. While according to the electoral authorities, Lukashenko collected over 80 percent of the vote, the opposition insists that his key contender, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, won the election.

At least 6,700 people were detained. According to the Belarusian Interior Ministry, three people have died and several hundred others sustained injuries during the unrest, including more than 120 security officers.

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RPT: REVIEW - Trump Loses Ground in 'Must Win' State of Florida, Biden Maintains Grip on Midwest

WASHINGTON, October 13 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential challenger Joe Biden in the past week expanded his edge in Florida, a crucial swing state where a Democratic victory would likely deal a knockout blow to President Donald Trump's re-election prospects.

On Monday, Trump held a political rally in central Florida, the first in-person event of its kind since announcing his COVID-19 diagnosis on October 2. Trump is trying to reverse Biden's recent momentum in the state, with only three weeks remaining until election day, which the president has of course tried to downplay. In a tweet before the rally, Trump said "only fake polls" show Biden ahead in the sunshine state.

BIDEN SEEKS KNOCKOUT BLOW

Biden does not need Florida to win the November 3 presidential election, assuming he maintains his position in current polling in the Midwest. A Biden victory in Florida, however, could put the election so far out of reach that Trump would likely be forced to concede in a timely manner.

The president has predicted on multiple occasions that the race will be decided by the Supreme Court. He also plans to contest a Biden victory because he believes mail-in ballots will lead to voter fraud. Yet Trump's strategy becomes harder to justify if Biden has a solid lead in the electoral college.

Unlike Biden, Trump finds himself in the difficult position of needing to win all three of the largest swing states (Texas, Florida and Pennsylvania) based on the current state of the electoral map polls.

According to poll aggregator Realclearpolitics.com (RCP), Biden grew his lead in Florida by 1.7% within the past week and is now ahead by a 3.7-margin (48% to 44.3%). It is important to note, however, that Biden's lead is almost within the 3.5-percent average margin of error of the ten polls in question.

Four years ago, Trump won by less than one percent in Florida (around 113,000 votes). About 900,000 registered voters in Florida are Cuban-American, 54% of which voted for Trump in 2016. Both candidates have recently upped efforts to win over this demographic. The fact most Cuban-Americans are adamantly opposed to the governments in Havana and Caracas partly explains Trump's hardline policies and Biden's recent hawkish rhetoric towards both countries. Because of the pandemic, many voters are choosing to vote by mail, and early results show that Democrats are more likely to do so, including in the state of Florida. Mailed-in ballots tend to have higher rejection rates primarily due to technical issues such as mismatched signatures and late arrivals. Experts say the rejection rate can reach as high as 2% in some states, USA Today reported on Monday.

Trump campaign manager Bill Stepien on Monday told FOX News that in Florida 55% of Democrats plan to vote by mail compared to 29% of Republicans. Stepien said reliance on mail-in ballots will have the Biden campaign "falling short of a win number" in Florida. More than 4.2 million Floridians have requested mail-in ballots so far, the report added, already exceeding the total requested in 2016, which was 3.3 million.

In fact, as of Sunday evening, more than 1.6 million votes have already been cast in Florida (about 17% of all votes cast in 2016), according to the US Elections Project, a site run by University of Florida professor Michael McDonald who compiles early voting data from nearly 40 states. The site also revealed that, overall, 9.8 million Americans have already voted - ten times more than the 2016 pace.

Biden is trying to steal up to four states in southern Republican "red" territory (Texas, Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina) in a similar manner as Trump stole three "blue" states in the Democrats' backyard in the upper Midwest in 2016. Trump leads in Texas by 4.4% and flipped

Georgia to his advantage in the past week, where he is now up by almost a half-percent. Biden meanwhile leads in North Carolina by 1.4 percent, almost a point higher than last week.

BIDEN VICTORY HIGHLY LIKELY, BUT NOT GUARANTEED

Biden's lead nationally jumped by more than 2 points since last week to 10.2 percent (51.8% to 41.6%), a bounce some analysts attribute to Trump's erratic behavior since contracting COVID-19. Biden is ahead by double digits in the RCP average of national surveys for the first time in more than three months. Moreover, his lead is over 3 points higher than where Clinton stood 22 days before the 2016 election.

However, the electoral college format requires candidates to win statewide contests, not national popular vote. A candidate must win at least 270 of 538 electoral votes apportioned across 50 states. Biden is ahead in eight of the top ten largest swing states and, if the election were called today, would win by a landslide 358-180 electoral votes. Yet this is highly misleading given how tight the polls are in the most crucial battleground states.

In 2016, Trump won all of the swing states where pre-election polling was within the margin-of-error (in addition to Wisconsin which was outside this range). Pollsters attributed this to the "hidden" Trump voter phenomenon. The theory is largely based on the simple premise that many Trump supporters - especially non-college degreed workers - are less likely to participate in surveys than Democrats.

Biden is looking to win back three crucial swing states in the Midwest that Clinton lost in 2016. The good news for Biden is that his lead in all three states has grown within the past week and is outside the typical margin of error. Biden leads by 7% in Michigan – a gain of 1.8% since October 4, according to the RCP average. He also grew his lead by a half point in both Pennsylvania (+7.1%) and Wisconsin (+6.1%).

Yet Biden should be cautious considering that Clinton's lead in all three of these states was larger at this point in the election four years ago. However, according to several political scientists, FBI Director James Comey's October 28 letter to Congress regarding the Clinton email probe potentially sunk her chances in Pennsylvania and Michigan, where her poll numbers plummeted to 1.9% and 3.3% respectively on the eve of the election. A similar type of "October surprise" is always possible, but not something the Trump campaign should rely on. In terms of the other three major swing states, Biden's lead remained flat in Arizona (+2.7%) and Minnesota (+9%) while Trump cut the former vice president's lead by nearly 2 points in Ohio (+0.6%).

A more likely scenario is to assume the incumbent wins states that are within the RCP's margin of error, as he did in 2016, because of the hidden Trump voter phenomenon in addition to rejection of mailed ballots. Based on this logic, Biden would win the race by a 20-electoral vote margin (279-259).

It is uncertain if the winner of the election will be announced by the end of November 3 because six swing states - Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin – will allow ballots to arrive late so long as they are postmarked by election day.

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REVIEW - Trump Loses Ground in 'Must Win' State of Florida, Biden Maintains Grip on Midwest

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Four years ago, Trump won by less than one percent in Florida (around 113,000 votes). About 900,000 registered voters in Florida are Cuban-American, 54% of which voted for Trump in 2016. Both candidates have recently upped efforts to win over this demographic. The fact most Cuban-Americans are adamantly opposed to the governments in Havana and Caracas partly explains Trump's hardline policies and Biden's recent hawkish rhetoric towards both countries. Because of the pandemic, many voters are choosing to vote by mail, and early results show that Democrats are more likely to do so, including in the state of Florida. Mailed-in ballots tend to have higher rejection rates primarily due to technical issues such as mismatched signatures and late arrivals. Experts say the rejection rate can reach as high as 2% in some states, USA Today reported on Monday.

Trump campaign manager Bill Stepien on Monday told FOX News that in Florida 55% of Democrats plan to vote by mail compared to 29% of Republicans. Stepien said reliance on mail-in ballots will have the Biden campaign "falling short of a win number" in Florida.

More than 4.2 million Floridians have requested mail-in ballots so far, the report added, already exceeding the total requested in 2016, which was 3.3 million.

In fact, as of Sunday evening, more than 1.6 million votes have already been cast in Florida (about 17% of all votes cast in 2016), according to the US Elections Project, a site run by University of Florida professor Michael McDonald who compiles early voting data from nearly 40

states. The site also revealed that, overall, 9.8 million Americans have already voted - ten times more than the 2016 pace.

Biden is trying to steal up to four states in southern Republican "red" territory (Texas, Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina) in a similar manner as Trump stole three "blue" states in the Democrats' backyard in the upper Midwest in 2016. Trump leads in Texas by 4.4% and flipped Georgia to his advantage in the past week, where he is now up by almost a half-percent. Biden meanwhile leads in North Carolina by 1.4 percent, almost a point higher than last week.

BIDEN VICTORY HIGHLY LIKELY, BUT NOT GUARANTEED

Biden's lead nationally jumped by more than 2 points since last week to 10.2 percent (51.8% to 41.6%), a bounce some analysts attribute to Trump's erratic behavior since contracting COVID-19. Biden is ahead by double digits in the RCP average of national surveys for the first time in more than three months. Moreover, his lead is over 3 points higher than where Clinton stood 22 days before the 2016 election.

However, the electoral college format requires candidates to win statewide contests, not national popular vote. A candidate must win at least 270 of 538 electoral votes apportioned across 50 states. Biden is ahead in eight of the top ten largest swing states and, if the election were called today, would win by a landslide 358-180 electoral votes. Yet this is highly misleading given how tight the polls are in the most crucial battleground states.

In 2016, Trump won all of the swing states where pre-election polling was within the margin-of-error (in addition to Wisconsin which was outside this range). Pollsters attributed this to the "hidden" Trump voter phenomenon. The theory is largely based on the simple premise that many Trump supporters - especially non-college degreed workers - are less likely to participate in surveys than Democrats.

Biden is looking to win back three crucial swing states in the Midwest that Clinton lost in 2016. The good news for Biden is that his lead in all three states has grown within the past week and is outside the typical margin of error. Biden leads by 7% in Michigan – a gain of 1.8% since October 4, according to the RCP average. He also grew his lead by a half point in both Pennsylvania (+7.1%) and Wisconsin (+6.1%).

Yet Biden should be cautious considering that Clinton's lead in all three of these states was larger at this point in the election four years ago. However, according to several political scientists, FBI Director James Comey's October 28 letter to Congress regarding the Clinton email probe potentially sunk her chances in Pennsylvania and Michigan, where her poll numbers plummeted to 1.9% and 3.3% respectively on the eve of the election. A similar type of "October surprise" is always possible, but not something the Trump campaign should rely on.

In terms of the other three major swing states, Biden's lead remained flat in Arizona (+2.7%) and Minnesota (+9%) while Trump cut the former vice president's lead by nearly 2 points in Ohio (+0.6%).

A more likely scenario is to assume the incumbent wins states that are within the RCP's margin of error, as he did in 2016, because of the hidden Trump voter phenomenon in addition to rejection of mailed ballots. Based on this logic, Biden would win the race by a 20-electoral vote margin (279-259).

It is uncertain if the winner of the election will be announced by the end of November 3 because six swing states - Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin – will allow ballots to arrive late so long as they are postmarked by election day.